

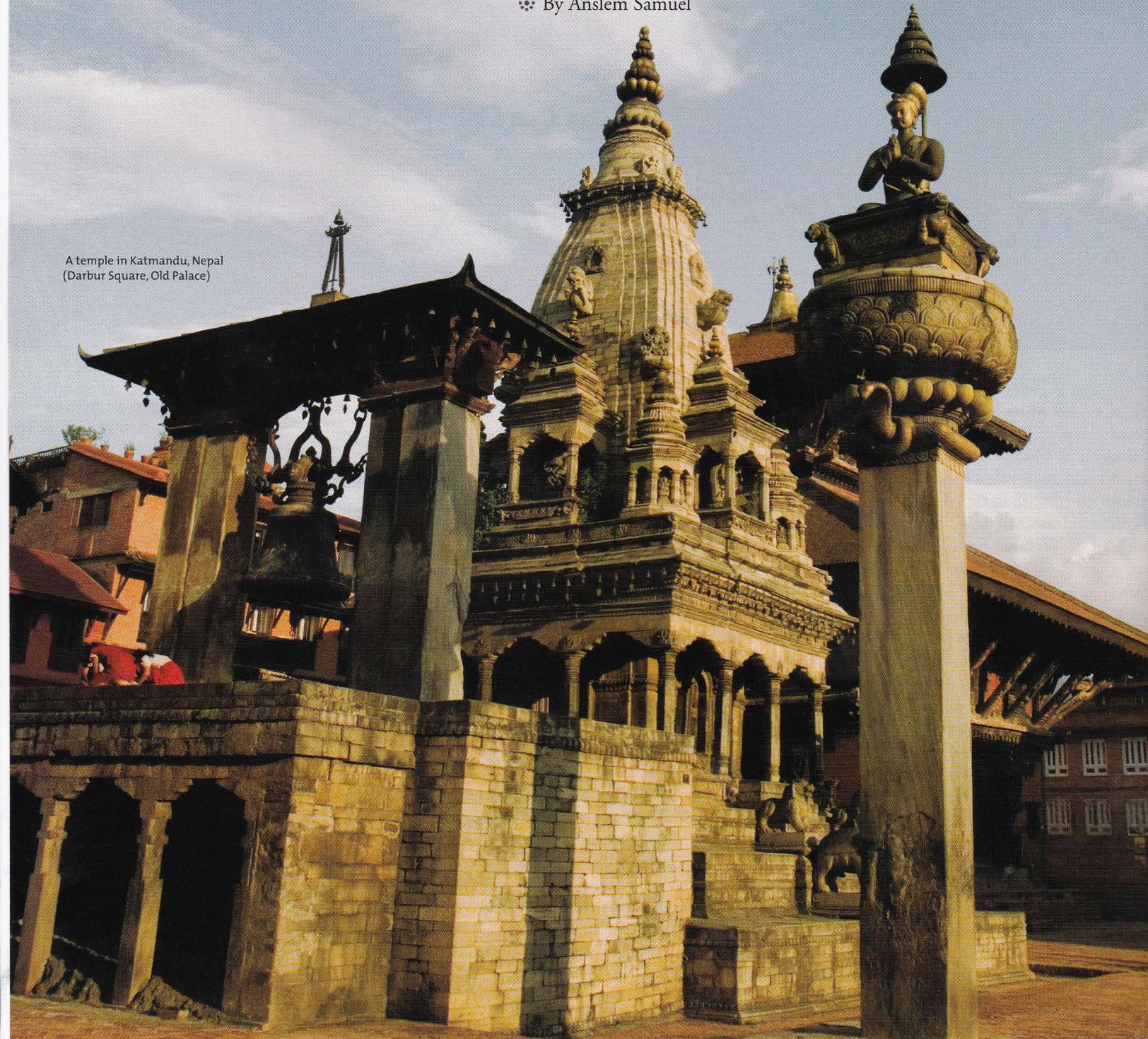


AN INNER TRANQUILITY

NEPAL HOLDS A PEACE UNFORESEEN BY THOSE WHO HAVE YET TO TRAVEL ITS LANDSCAPE

❁ By Anslem Samuel

A temple in Katmandu, Nepal
(Darbur Square, Old Palace)





NESTLED BETWEEN CHINA AND INDIA, Nepal is one of the world's poorest and least developed countries with almost one-third of its people living below the poverty line. But what the South Asian country lacks in economic power, it makes up for in a wealth of natural beauty. From the pristine landscapes of the Dolakha district to the Great Himalaya Mountain Range that runs alongside its northern border, this landlocked oasis is rich in culture and historical significance. Home to eight of the world's 10 highest peaks—including the

record-breaking Mount Everest—Nepal is a favorite destination for hiking enthusiasts and seekers of breathtaking views.

The sheer beauty of the land is further accented by the ancient architecture. The crooked city streets are lined with multi-roofed pagodas, gold-topped stupas (mound-like structures common throughout parts of Asia) and arcane stone sculptures, while stunning Hindu and Buddhist temples reflect the heavy religious influences from nearby India and Tibet.

New Haven, CT native Millette Núñez spent

three weeks backpacking through Nepal and was taken aback by the many intricate shrines and religious freedoms the country had to offer. “The temples are absolutely astonishing,” says Núñez. “You’re talking about things that are so old but also so beautiful. The architecture there is so different than what we’re accustomed to here in the West. It’s just aesthetically pleasing...and religion and spirituality were really a way of life there. It was really cool seeing Buddhist and Hindu people praying next to each other and it not be a big deal.”

Over the years, pieces of the Western world have begun trickling into the industrialized parts of Nepal, with neon signs advertising international phone services cluttering shop windows, an influx of cyber cafes, and the increasing popularity of American beverages like Coca-Cola. While merchants hocking their wares and rickshaw taxis whizzing by are commonplace in the main metropolises, life in the smaller, more isolated, village areas is quite different. The focus there is on simplicity and being one with nature. This is the Nepal that most tourists come to explore.

Prawesh Deo, a native Nepali, can attest to the many awe-inspiring destinations his homeland has to offer. “Mount Everest has made Nepal famous,” says Deo. “Nepal is basically known for Himalayan trekking and all the beautiful mountains, lakes, and glaciers. Most tourists are interested in those places because you won’t find such places anywhere else.”

Before embarking on a journey through the many scenic biking and hiking trails, it’s best to fill up on local dishes. Traipsing through one of the steepest countries on the planet will certainly work up an appetite.

While the use of curry and spice reflect the strong Indian influence, Nepali cuisine is more about nourishment than gourmet cooking. The national dish is daal bhatt, boiled rice (bhatt) with a thin lentil sauce (daal), that’s typically eaten once in the morning to provide energy before a long day and again in the evening to replenish the body. In dryer regions where rice is scarce, other grains such as maize, wheat, millet, barley and buckwheat are the primary food source, while various types of indigenous vegetables, fruits and meat balance out a



A giant prayer wheel at a temple in the village of Marpha, Nepal

typical meal. Regardless of the type of food that’s consumed, the goal is to keep the body fully fueled by eating in abundance. So asking for seconds and thirds is not frowned upon, but actually encouraged. In fact, the local greeting of “Bhaat khaayo?” roughly translates to mean, “Have you eaten rice?”

“How people in the States say, ‘Good morning,’ or, ‘Hello, how are you?’ in Nepal, the culture is if you see someone the first thing you offer them is food,” says Deo. “You never say, ‘Would you like to have something?’ You just say, ‘Have you had your meal?’ If not, then you have to [eat] here.”

Once your belly is full, it’s time to hit the trail and explore Nepal’s many wonders. Make sure to pack comfortable hiking boots because your trek through the rugged terrain of the hills will test your endurance and stamina. Travel to the city of Kakani in late winter and you’ll be greeted by a flush of vibrant color as the rhododendrons that blanket the

mountainside come into full bloom. The picturesque scene can be captured from many angles, so biking and trekking are quite popular here. Visitors are advised to travel with a local guide, as the terrain can be quite hard to navigate alone.

“I took many rolls of film,” says Núñez. “It’s just so amazing and pristine; not a lot of people are up there, cars can’t even go up there. You’re talking about places that aren’t really accessible, which makes them all the more beautiful.”

Another popular place to visit is the town of Pokhara. Although the modernized metropolis lacks an abundance of tourist attractions within it, people are drawn here for the outlying sights. Just outside of town, to the north and south, there are magnificent canyons that spread throughout the Pokhara Valley. Patale Chhango (Hell’s Fall), where the Fewa Lake flows into the Seti River only to disappear into a huge chasm, is also worth exploring. It’s truly a



Laughing Limbu Woman (Limbu are indigenous peoples of Eastern Nepal)

stunning and remarkable sight to behold. And for the true adventurers, Pokhara is home to the Mahendra Gufa, known locally as Chamero Odhaar, meaning House of Bats. This intricate bat-filled cave system contains magnificent stalagmites and stalactites that vandals have been known to break off as souvenirs, as well as a plethora of shimmering rock types that sparkle when hit by the beam of a flashlight or torch.

Unlike other destinations where travelers simply come to snap a few pictures and relax in a plush hotel suite, Nepal is a place where experiencing native life is the main draw. That's why "rural tourism" or "village trek tours," where foreign travelers fully immerse themselves in a country's culture, is becoming increasingly popular. In the less urban regions of Nepal, some villagers make rooms available

in their homes so that visitors can learn about their customs and traditions firsthand. For the duration of their stay, rural tourists are entrenched in Nepali culture and treated as members of the family. This provides impoverished locals with a much-needed form of extra income, while visitors take a once in a lifetime journey they won't soon forget.

"Nepal is a country where we treat visitors like God," says Deo. "Whenever the people in the extreme remote places of Nepal see a stranger they take them to their home, feed them, and treat them very well. That's why anyone from the West that goes to the remote areas wants to go every year, because of that culture. Because of that respect they get from there."

Unfortunately, tourism in Nepal has taken a hit in recent years due to continued political instability caused by a violent Maoist insurgency that has plagued the tiny country over the past decade

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and claimed tens of thousands lives. While the comprehensive peace agreement that was signed in November 2006 effectively ended the insurgency, there are still pockets of violence that occur from time to time. With that in mind, foreigners should stay abreast of ongoing political developments in Nepal. Despite the civil unrest, many visitors still insist that the citizen's warmth towards outsiders is unparalleled.

"I can't say I ever felt anything but welcomed and loved," says Núñez. "And I've been to a lot of places where people are in unfortunate circumstances and even with people [in the street] asking for money I never felt like I was in trouble, and even more than that, I just felt the people were really warm."

Before scheduling a trip to Nepal, make sure to pay attention to the time of year. Known for its turbulent monsoon season, tourists are advised to avoid the region between mid-June and September. A better time to visit is at the beginning of the dry season in October/November when the weather is balmy, visibility is better and the countryside is lush and green following the months of heavy rainfall. The only downside is that some of the roads may still be damaged from mudslides, so waiting until February or April when commuting is easier is also an option. And if you don't mind a slight chill in the air, December and January provide breathtakingly clear skies and snowcapped mountains for the conquering. Just remember to dress in layers and pack your camera to immortalize your time among one of the world's few untapped natural treasures. "In Nepal we're talking about bare necessities that so many people were lacking and despite that they were still able to be full of life and welcoming. That was really beautiful to me," says Nunez. "Honestly it's life changing. It's an experience I wish I could have again." ♥